

N U T R I T I O N FACT SHEET

■ HANDLING EGGS SAFELY AT HOME

Eggs require special precautions, especially for people vulnerable to *Salmonella enteritidis*. The USDA offers these guidelines for handling eggs safely in your home, and offers a toll-free number, which is at the end of this article, if you have questions.

Eggs are a perishable food and must be properly stored and cooked. Raw eggs that were contaminated with *Salmonella enteritidis* bacteria have caused some outbreaks of foodborne illness. Most outbreaks appear to be related to pooling of eggs, time/temperature abuse, and incomplete cooking.

Most eggs do not contain *Salmonella enteritidis* and the risk of contracting *salmonellosis* from raw or undercooked eggs is extremely small. Scientists have concluded that *Salmonella enteritidis* can get inside the egg shell. Just how or when this contamination occurs is still unclear, but scientists are working to better understand the problem and find solutions.

Proper refrigeration at 40° F or below limits the growth of *Salmonella enteritidis* and proper cooking at 140° F or above destroys the organism. Therefore, consumers must follow safe food handling practices when preparing eggs.

Special precautions are needed when eggs are served to people who are particularly vulnerable to *Salmonella enteritidis* infections. High risk groups are the very young, the elderly, pregnant women (because of risk to the fetus), and people already weakened by serious illness or whose immune systems are weakened.

Consumer Guidelines

Consumers should take the following precautions when handling both raw eggs and foods in which eggs are an ingredient, such as quiche or baked custard.

- **Avoid eating raw eggs and foods containing raw eggs:** homemade Caesar salad, homemade hollandaise sauce, and homemade mayonnaise, for example. Likewise, homemade ice cream and homemade eggnog should be avoided unless made with a cooked, custard-type base. Commercial forms of these products are safe to serve since they are made with pasteurized liquid eggs. Commercial pasteurization destroys *Salmonella* bacteria.
- **Cook eggs thoroughly** until both the yolk and the white are firm. This is especially important for people most at risk for foodborne illness. Those electing not to consume hard cooked eggs can minimize their risk by cooking the egg until the white is completely firm and the yolk begins to thicken but is not hard. Fried eggs should be cooked on both sides or in a covered pan. Scrambled eggs should be cooked until firm throughout.
- Realize that eating lightly cooked foods containing eggs, such as meringues, and French toast, may be risky for people in high-risk groups.

Consumers should also follow the usual safe food-handling practices for eggs:

- Buy refrigerated grade AA or A eggs with clean, uncracked shells.
- At home, keep eggs in their original carton and refrigerate as soon as possible at a temperature no higher than 40° F. Do not wash eggs before storing or using them. Washing is a routine part of commercial egg processing and rewashing is unnecessary.
- Use raw shell eggs within 5 weeks after bringing them home. Use hard-cooked eggs (in the shell or peeled) within 1 week after cooking. Use leftover yolks and whites within 4 days after removing them from the shell.
- Avoid keeping raw or cooked eggs and egg-containing foods out of the refrigerator for more than 2 hours, including time for preparing and serving (but not cooking). If you hide hard-cooked eggs for an egg hunt, either follow the 2-hour rule or do not eat the eggs.
- Wash hands, utensils, equipment, and work areas with hot, soapy water before and after they come in contact with eggs and egg-containing foods.
- Review traditional recipes that, when served, contain raw or under-cooked eggs. Replace with recipes that, when served, contain thoroughly cooked eggs.
- Serve cooked eggs and egg-containing foods hot, immediately after cooking; or hold for buffet-style serving at 140° F or higher; or refrigerate at 40° F or below for serving later. Use within 3 to 4 days.
- When refrigerating a large amount of a hot egg-containing food or leftover, divide it into several shallow containers so it will cool quickly.

For more information on handling eggs safely, call the USDA's Meat and Poultry toll-free hotline 10a.m. to 4p.m. weekdays EST, 1-800-535-4555